

## **A letter from Doug Orbaker in Nicaragua**

September 2011

### **What We Bring With Us**

I saw a photo of myself recently—from back when my beard still had some dark brown in it and my hair was on the top of my head instead of falling down behind it. It was taken when I was leading a group from the community where I lived in Pennsylvania to Nicaragua after Hurricane Mitch.

I remember that group and the community where we worked quite well. The group from the United States was partly from the church where I was pastor and partly from other churches, with a few others besides—some of my closest friends. We worked in the community of Susulí, in the Department of Matagalpa, building houses with those whose homes had been destroyed by the hurricane.

My wife and I arrived in Managua a few days ahead of the rest of the group, and we were in the CEPAD housing when a group that had been to Susulí came back to Managua. When they found out that we were going to Susulí the complaints started: “Oh, the food is terrible, you're all going to get sick.” “The work is too hard.” “The outhouse smells terrible.” “The kids aren't friendly, nobody wants to play.” My wife and I decided to keep our group away from that group so that they wouldn't hear the complaints before they even got to the community.

Our experience in the community was different. Yes, a few of us got sick, but nothing serious. The work was hard. The outhouse did smell bad (I've never been in one that smelled good). But we found a friendly community and had a great time playing with the kids. Through my wife and the CEPAD translator (my own Spanish was pretty rudimentary at the time) we talked to people and shared experiences; we learned about their lives, and we shared their tears as they talked about the hurricane.

Recently I was back in Susulí. I don't get there very often, but I've been there a couple of times recently getting ready for a project of building single family in-home water filters. During the week when the filters were being built, I stayed with the family of the pastor who had been one of the organizers of the work after the hurricane. His wife, Rosevel, had been the cook for our group 11 years ago, and the boy in the photo was a baby in her arms when we were there. The first evening that I was in the house, Rosevel pulled out a package of photos. She had photos from only one of the delegations that had been there in those post-Mitch years—ours.

I think this shows something very important about those who leave the U.S. to do a “mission trip” in another country. The most important thing that you bring with you is your set of attitudes! Those who come expecting that Nicaragua (or . . . —put the name of the country you are visiting here) will be a place like the U.S. will inevitably be disappointed. Those who can't adjust to different foods, prepared differently, will probably have a few days of diarrhea. Those who think that they are coming to build something that the local people can't build by themselves will find that the local people work harder and with more ingenuity and creativity than those of us from the U.S. do.

However, the most important things that “mission trips” build are attitudes and relationships. Some groups spend all of their free time by themselves, speaking English and relating only to each other. Other groups spend their free time playing with kids, struggling with the Spanish to try to understand what one of the Nicaraguans is saying, or trying to learn to pat tortillas—the things that build relationships. The difference is neither in the work nor in the communities where they visit.

The difference is in what we bring with us.

I certainly can't claim to have left all of my North American attitudes and expectations at the airport when I came here. Even after seven years here I sometimes find myself getting frustrated at something that seems so simple to me but is made so complicated by the Nicaraguan style. When I manage to reflect back on it later, I can see my lifelong “gringo” attitudes showing through.

I don't believe this is necessarily a bad thing. There is much in U.S. culture that Nicaragua could stand to learn—but there is also much that we in the U.S. could learn from Nicaragua. When the cashier in a convenience store glances at the clock and closes his register with five people standing in line and no one else ready to take his place and with the manager standing there watching but doing nothing while the five customers wait (I don't know how long—I left!) I think Nicaragua could stand to learn a little bit from the U.S. about taking care of customers. (This was in a convenience store related to a large U.S.-based chain.) On the other hand, when I see myself rushing around, concentrating more on the work than on the people involved, I know that I could stand to learn something from Nicaraguans about living and working together.

Sure, we all bring our attitudes with us. But we all also need to be open to learning from the attitudes and practices of others. Mission is not about sharing our largess with those less fortunate. It is about sharing the gifts that we have and accepting the gifts that are offered. It is laughter, song, and games with kids. It is shared sorrow, loss and tears. Mission is the life we bring with us when we go to another place to serve, and it is the even richer life that we take back with us when we return.

Doug Orbaker

The *2011 Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study*, p. 289

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